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ABSTRACT

A unit on existentialism is suggested to counteract the indifferent attitude that students have toward much of the literature with which they are presented. The key to a successful literature unit is immediate and total student involvement. Topics, authors, and works which may be used to arouse student interest are presented. (CK)

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UNIT ON EXISTENTIALISM

by
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Are you nonplussed by the indifferent attitude of your students toward many of the literature units which you attempt to present? If so, try a unit on existentialism. One of the most rewarding experiences of my teaching career came recently when I involved my senior English classes with an existentialist unit. Never have I received such an enthusiastic response from students. The idea is simple and easy.

In my opinion the key to any successful unit is immediate and total student involvement; consequently, I begin this unit by dividing my class into four groups which spend the first three to five days in the library doing research and group work and later present their findings and conclusions in the classroom. The groups are divided around the following areas:

Group I
- I. Existentialism
- I. A. Soren Kierkgaard contributions
- B. Contemporary existentialism
  - a. Leading advocates
  - b. Contemporary meaning

Group II
- II. Albert Camus
  - A. His philosophy
  - B. Read and discuss several essays and short stories by Camus

Group III
- III. Jean Paul Sartre
  - A. His philosophy
  - B. Read and discuss a play and several short stories by Sartre

Group IV
- IV. Franz Kafka
  - A. His philosophy
  - B. Read and discuss several short stories by Kafka.

After the groups have organized, done their work, and planned their presentation, we go back into the classroom where they present them in the form of panel discussions. This phase always generates

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much interest and interaction which prepares the students for the directed reading and study of existentialist works. Since I use a thematic approach, we study works from several genre. Because of their availability and appropriateness I use the following:

1. Franz Kafka	"The Metamorphosis"
2. Franz Kafka	"The Burrow"
3. Jean Paul Sartre	"The Wall"
4. E. E. Robinson	"Richard Corey"
5. Albert Camus	"The Guest"
6. Albert Camus	*The Stranger*

Usually, we read and discuss the short stories and poem first then culminate the unit with the reading and discussion of *The Stranger*. All works are read and discussed in terms of what the existentialists believe and are trying to say in their writings. I have found the following questions extremely helpful in guiding the discussion of this unit:

1. How does this story relate to the existentialist belief of absurdity in life and death?
2. Define loneliness by finding descriptions and images in the story about how characters act, appear, and feel when they are isolated from human society.
3. What is the cause of isolation in each case?
4. What must men do in order to become isolated?
5. What must each individual do to overcome his isolation? How dependent upon someone else would he have to be to overcome his isolation?
6. To what extent are people like the ones we have read about who do not sacrifice individual conviction for the sake of social conformity, admirable or not admirable?

These questions will lead to many other similar and germane ideas which will emerge during the discussions.

As a culmination, I divide the class into four or five groups and allow them to work together and present another panel discussion on one of the following topics:

1. Construct a case defending Meursault against the prosecutor's accusation.
2. Discuss the following statement: Meursault is amoral while Raymon is immoral.

3. Compare the isolation of Meursault with that of any other two characters from the short stories or poem.
4. Discuss the views of religion and morality implied in *The Stranger*.
5. Discuss the similarities found in Sartre's and Camus' protagonists.
6. Discuss the importance of imagery in any two of the works.
7. Contrast Kafka's style with that of Camus and Sartre.

These topics may also be used for theme assignments; however, I have had outstanding results with them when used in group situations.

If you are afraid of provocative questions and ideas in your classroom, do not try this unit, for there will truly be some "shockers" expressed. If you do attempt this unit, be prepared for rewarding experiences, for they will surely be numerous.